

Customer reviews - love them, but don't trust them!

It's a well known maxim of marketing that you can't beat "word of mouth" as a way to spread your message. The reason is that we tend to trust the word of another, even when we don't actually know that person very well. But should we be so trusting?

Marketers are always trying to leverage this "people power" to disseminate information. Online you see it more and more in the form of Customer Reviews, where you can read comments from people who have purchased a certain product or service you may be interested in.

This is great news for the store owner, as positive comments are likely to influence you to purchase. If you have an online product or service, it makes great sense to post up some great customer comments to try and influence the potential purchaser, and perhaps increase your conversion rate by a few percentage points.

However, my colleague and consultant psychologist Jamie Miller BSc (Hons), Dip Occ Psych, FRGS reminds me that when it comes to purchasing, you need to treat these Customer Reviews with a large pinch of salt. The reason is "cognitive dissonance." Psychologists describe this as an uncomfortable feeling or stress that comes from holding two conflicting views. In our example of purchasing a product or service, this might be derived from buying something you thought was going to be great, and it turned out to be just good.

To ease the dissonance you feel you modify one view. Either you agree that the product is just good, and if possible change it, or you might convince yourself that it is great - after all you have invested in it, both in time choosing it, and in real hard cash to purchase it. This investment helps you to convince you that you have done the right thing. You then support the new view by ignoring information to the contrary, and seeking out information to support that viewpoint.

Let's say you were looking to buy a flat screen TV. In order of price high to low there is the Sony, the LG and the Amstrad. You know the Sony is the best all round, but you can only afford the LG, and you buy it. When you get it home, you notice that the picture is really bright. The colours vivid. The picture crisp. You might even go online and find a review that has a complimentary review of your TV.

When reading customer reviews you should be aware that even the most level headed and rational of us can be susceptible to "cognitive dissonance" hence you should treat Customer Reviews with a large pinch of salt!

